

WMD, Terrorism and Proliferation

Ray Takeyh

Senior Fellow, Middle Eastern Studies

Council on Foreign Relations

Testimony Before Subcommittee on Prevention of Nuclear and Biological Attack

Committee on Homeland Security

September 8, 2005

As the debate lingers regarding vanished Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, yet another proliferation crisis is looming in the Middle East. Washington and much of the international community fears that under the auspices of civilian research program, Iran is gradually accumulating the technology and the expertise necessary for the construction of nuclear weapons. The critical question remains would Iran transfer such weapons to its terrorist allies should it acquire a nuclear capability? The answer to this question requires a better understanding of the interlocking calculations that propel Iran toward the nuclear option in the first place.

Why Does Iran Want the Bomb?

Contrary to many Western assumptions, Iran's quest for nuclear weapons does not stem from irrational ideological postulations, but from a judicious attempt to craft a viable deterrent posture against a range of threats. It is often argued that Iran's dangerous and unpredictable neighborhood grants it ample incentive for acquiring nuclear weapons. However, it is hard to see how persistent volatility on Iran's frontiers can be ameliorated by the possession of such weapons. Instability in Afghanistan and Central Asia may be sources of significant concern for Iran's defense planners, but nuclear weapons can scarcely defuse such crises. A more careful examination reveals that Iran's nuclear program has been conditioned by a narrower but more pronounced set of threats. Historically, the need to negate the American and Iraqi threats has been the primary motivation. In more recent times, the simmering concerns regarding the stability of a nuclear-armed Pakistan have similarly enhanced the value of such weapons to Iran's planners. In the end, for Iran this is a weapon of deterrence not one that is to be given to terrorist organizations or brandished to gain diplomatic leverage in the region.

From the Islamic Republic's perspective, the Gulf is its most important strategic arena, constituting its most reliable access to the international petroleum market. For long, it was Iraq that actuated the theocratic elite toward a search for a nuclear option. Saddam's Iraq not only sought hegemony over the Gulf, and indeed the larger Middle East, but also waged a merciless eight-year war against Iran. It is the developments in the Gulf that will likely condition Iran's defense posture and nuclear ambitions for the foreseeable future.

The impact of the Iran-Iraq war on Tehran's nuclear calculations cannot be underestimated. Iraq's employment of chemical weapons against Iranian civilians and combatants led to an estimated 50,000 casualties and permanently scared Iran's national psyche. Whatever their tactical military utility, in the hands of Saddam chemical weapons were tools of terror, as he hoped that through their indiscriminate use he could frighten and demoralize the Iranian populace. To an extent this strategy proved effective, Iraq's targeting of Iranian cities during the latter stages of the war did much to undermine the national support for the continuation of the conflict. Far from being a historic memory, the war and its legacy are debated daily in the pages of newspapers, in the halls of the universities, and the floor of the parliament. As the newspaper *Ya Letharat* noted, "One can still see the wounds of our war veterans that were inflicted by poison gas as used by Saddam Hussein that were made in Germany and France." The dramatic memories of the war have led to cries of "never again," uniting a fractious public behind the desire to achieve not just a credible deterrent posture but potentially a convincing retaliatory capability.

Beyond the human toll, the war also changed Iran's strategic doctrine. During the war, Iran persisted with the notion that technological superiority cannot overcome revolutionary zeal and a willingness to offer martyrs. To compensate for its lack of weaponry, Iran launched human wave assaults and used its young population as a tool of an offensive military strategy. The devastation of the war and the loss of "martyrdom" appetite among Iran's youth has invalidated that theory. As Rafsanjani acknowledged, "With regards to chemical, bacteriological and radiological weapons, it was made clear during the war that these weapons are very decisive. We should fully equip ourselves in both offensive and defensive use of these weapons. Moreover, the indifference of the international community to Saddam's crimes also left its mark, leading Iran to reject the notion that international treaties and compacts can ensure its security. As the former commander of the Revolutionary Guards Mohsen Rezai stipulated, "We cannot, generally speaking, argue that our country will derive any benefit from accepting international treaties." Deterrence could no longer be predicated on revolutionary commitment and international opinion, as Iran required a more credible military response.

The overthrow of Saddam's regime has diminished but by no means eliminated the Iraqi challenge. The unpredictable nature of developments in Iraq has intensified Iran's anxieties and further enhanced the utility of the nuclear option. Should Iraq emerge as a close US ally policing the Gulf on the behest of its superpower benefactor, Iran will stand marginalized and isolated. Indeed, the long-standing ambition of successive Iraqi governments to assert predominance in the Gulf may finally be nurtured by a superpower seeking local allies to contain recalcitrant states such as Iran. A revival of the Nixon Doctrine, whereby the US sought to ensure the stability of the Persian Gulf by arming its pliant Iranian ally, with Iraq now assuming that role, would seriously constrain Tehran's options. A presumptive nuclear capability would grant Iran a greater ability to assert its interests and press its claims. At any rate, the unforeseen conduct of the sovereign Iraqi government compels the theocratic leadership to formulate a range of contingencies, and one such option is to sustain a robust nuclear research program.

Iraq is not the only potential problem that Iran faces, as looking east lies a nuclear-armed Pakistan with its own strain of anti-Shiism. Although General Musharaff is routinely celebrated in Washington as reliable ally in the war against terrorism, Pakistan's past is more checkered and problematic. Throughout the 1990s, Pakistan perceived the demise of the Soviet Union as a unique opportunity to exert its influence in Central Asia and to capture the emerging markets in that critical area. Afghanistan was viewed as an indispensable bridge to Central Asia, and Pakistani intelligence services did much to ensure the triumph of the radical Taliban movement in the ensuing Afghan civil war. The rise of the Taliban and the eventual establishment of the al-Qadea camps in Afghanistan had much to do with Pakistan's cynical strategy. Throughout the 1990s, such Pakistani machinations caused considerable tensions with Iran that was uneasy about the emergence of a radical Sunni regime on its borders.

Although since September 11th with Pakistan's final abandonment of the Taliban, its relations with Iran have improved, the specter of instability in Islamabad haunts Iran's leadership. The possibility of the collapse of the current military government and its displacement by a radical Sunni regime with access to nuclear weapons is something Iran must guard against. The detonation of the bomb by Pakistan in 1998 caused considerable anxiety in Tehran with Rafsanjani stressing, "This is a major step toward proliferation of nuclear weapons. This is a truly dangerous matter and we must be concerned." Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi also mused, "This was one genie that was much better to have stayed confined in the bottle." Along with Iraq, Pakistan is a potential threat that Iran must take into consideration as it plots its defense strategy.

Although both Iraq and Pakistan constitute long-term sources of concern, today the United States stands as Iran's foremost strategic challenge. US-Iranian relations have become even more strained in recent years. Under the auspices of the Bush Doctrine, the United States has arrogated itself the right to

employ preemptive military intervention as a means of disarming radical states. The massive projection of American power on all of Iran's frontiers since September 11th has added credence to the Iranian claim of being encircled by the United States. The conservative newspaper *Jumhuri-ye Islami* captured Tehran's dilemma by noting, "In the contemporary world, it is obvious that having access to advanced weapons shall cause deterrence and therefore security, and will neutralize the evil wishes of great powers to attack other nations and countries." In a rare note of agreement, the leading liberal newspaper, *Aftab-e Yazd* similarly stressed that, given the regional exigencies, "In the future Iran might be thinking about the military aspects of nuclear energy."

The remarkable success of Operation Iraqi Freedom in overthrowing Saddam cannot but have made a formidable impression on Iran's leadership. The fact remains that Iraq's anticipated chemical weapons did not deter Washington from military intervention. As an Iranian official confessed, "the fact that Saddam was toppled in twenty-one days is something that should concern all the countries in the region." Conversely, North Korea offers its own lessons and possibilities. Pyongyang's presumed nuclear capability has not only obviated a preemptive invasion, but actually generated potential security and economic benefits. President Bush may loathe Kim Jong Il, but far from contemplating military action, the United States and its allies are considering an economic relief package and security guarantees to dissuade North Korea from its nuclear path. The contrasting fates of Iraq and North Korea certainly elevate the significance of nuclear weapons in the Iranian clerical cosmology.

Post September 11th developments in the Middle East have had a paradoxical impact on the Islamic Republic. Two of Iran's formidable foes, the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, have been overthrown by the United States. In the meantime, Iran's American nemesis is entangled in an Iraqi quagmire, draining its resources and tempering its ambitions. Nevertheless, the Iranian clerical elite expect a turbulent future, which accentuates their sense of insecurity. Iran remains in America's crosshairs, at a time when the US military presence in the region has never been greater. The influential *Iran News* emphasized this point in an editorial stressing, "Based on Bush's record after 9/11, one can only conclude that the US has not invaded our two immediate neighbors to the east and the west just to fight al-Qaeda. Consequently, astute political observers warn that Iran is next on the US list of direct targets." Such anxieties enhance the apparent strategic utility of nuclear weapons to Iran and validate the claim that the Islamic Republic requires such a capability to ensure both regime survival and territorial integrity.

As evident, Iran's nuclear calculations and terrorist activities are distinctly separate. To be sure, any cursory observation reveals that among Iran's most entrenched positions is its sponsorship of terrorism. However, much of Iranian terrorist activities today are limited to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as the Islamic Republic remains a generous benefactor of Hezbollah, and to a lesser extent, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Would Iran be tempted to offer its nuclear arsenal to such forces as they wage their campaigns against Israel? Certainly, since the inception of the Islamic Republic, Iran has defied the laws of international politics by pursuing an irrational policy toward the peace process that has subordinated its practical interest to its ideological imperatives. Iran's nuclear weapons program may have begun for reasonable strategic purposes, but would those calculations be overtaken by ideological factors, leading Iran to transfer such arms to its terrorist clients?

The answer to these questions requires a better understanding of the nature of Iranian-Israeli conflict. For a generation of Iranian clerics, Israel remains an illegitimate state, usurping sacred Islamic lands and serving as an instrument of American imperial encroachment of the Middle East. Such an ideological animus has led Iran to offer substantial monetary and moral support to anti-Israeli terrorist organizations. But, Iran's regime does not seem inordinately concerned about Israel's nuclear monopoly, nor does it feel itself necessarily threatened by Israel's formidable armed forces. Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, has stipulated Iran's controlled-rage by stressing, "Palestine issue is not Iran's jihad." The alarmist Iranian rhetoric and the immediacy of the Israeli threat is more an attempt to mobilize

domestic and regional constituencies behind an anti-Israeli policy then a genuine reflection of concern. For the Islamic Republic, Israel maybe an ideological affront, but it is not an existential threat mandating provision of nuclear weapons or offering such arms to its terrorist clients.

Despite Iran's inflammatory conduct, the fact is that during the past quarter of a century, it has sought to regulate its low intensity conflict with Israel and has assiduously avoided direct military confrontation with Jerusalem. This is a conflict that is largely waged by proxies in a controlled manner. Such a strategy allows Iran to brandish its Islamic credentials without necessarily exposing itself to inordinate danger and does not call for granting nuclear arms to clients. For example, Iran has not transferred any of its chemical or biological weapons to terrorist organizations nor its more powerful and potent missile technology. For Iran, it may be important for these groups to survive and wage their conflict against Israel, but such conflict has to take place within distinct redlines. A policy of restrained hostility best serves Iran's strategic and ideological purposes.

Moreover, the critical mission for Iran's theocratic oligarchs is survival of their regime and preservation of Iran's territorial integrity. As such, transferring nuclear arms to a terrorist client that may be difficult to restrain or discipline would certainly expose the regime to an unacceptable degree of Israeli or American retaliation. Any measure that could potentially threaten the clerical leaders hold on power will be strongly resisted by Iran's risk-averse rulers. The mullahs maybe perennially hostile to Israel, but they do appreciate that should such hostility escape its controlled parameters, they could find themselves in a confrontation that would indeed threaten the survival of their regime. So long as Iran's rulers remain focus on their power, they would recoil from rash measures such as giving nuclear bombs to third parties, however reliable and long-standing their relationship with those parties maybe.

It is such calculations that in the aftermath of September 11th have somewhat even altered the nature of Iran's relationship with Hezbollah. At a time when the US is waging a global war against terrorism, Iran is becoming more circumspect and cautious in its support for Hezbollah. While Iran's sustained support for rejectionist forces has garnered it much regional acclaim in the past, such conduct today makes it a possible target for US retaliation. In an ironic twist of events, Iranian leaders who previously sought to instigate violence by Hezbollah are increasingly urging it to behave with restraint. The guardians of the theocracy are beginning to discern that tempering their approach to the peace process is a policy that Iran may soon find in its interest.

In sum, the Islamic Republic's search for nuclear weapons stems from a strategic calculation of seeking deterrence against a range of actors. This is not a weapon to be brandish as part of an aggressive diplomacy or granted to Iran's terrorist clients. Nor are Iran's nuclear motivations necessarily immutable, as more imaginative American diplomacy can still prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold, obviating another proliferation crisis in the Middle East.